

Fearful Dogs

What causes dogs to be fearful? There isn't one answer. Some dogs have one or two very specific fears, some dogs are afraid of many things. The roots can be in their genes, in their early experiences, in traumatic events, or in some combination.

Certain postures and behaviors can let you know if your dog is afraid: a lowered head or body, ears tucked back, a tail tucked under, panting or drooling, and trembling. A fearful dog may also growl or bark, urinate or defecate, become destructive, or attempt to escape.

The first step to take with a fearful dog is a visit to your veterinarian to rule out medical causes, especially if: the fear is new; you haven't noticed it before; or if the behavior is getting worse.

Helping Your Fearful Dog

You can help a dog to overcome their fears with work and patience. If you just ignore your dog's fear, it probably won't go away and will likely become worse. The extent to which your dog's fearful reactions can be lessened depends on many factors including your dog's personality, what socialization they experienced when young, the extent of their fears, and the triggers (things that cause your dog to be scared).

Desensitization & Counter-Conditioning

Desensitization and counter-conditioning are two effective techniques for reducing your dog's fear. To desensitize your dog, you start by exposing them to their trigger at a very low level. If, for example, your dog is afraid of passing traffic, you start with your dog on leash far away from the passing cars--far enough that there's no fearful reaction. Reward your dog with delicious treats and praise for all calm behavior. As your dog gets comfortable, you can gradually move closer, rewarding for calm behavior at each step. Counter-conditioning is teaching your dog to do something other than react fearfully--an incompatible behavior--in the presence of the scary thing. For example, as you bring your dog gradually closer to the traffic that used to cause fear, have them sit or perform a trick to earn a great reward.

Desensitization and counter-conditioning can teach your dog to associate good things with what used to scare them, so make sure you don't use punishment or scolding. That will keep the process from working. For these techniques to work, you have to proceed at your dog's pace; that means that if you ever see a fearful reaction, you've gone too far, and you need to back up and work more slowly. These are processes that can take anything from days to months, and can't be hurried.

Because desensitization and counter-conditioning are difficult to do, and because behavior problems may get worse if they're done incorrectly, you may want to seek the professional help of an animal behavior specialist in learning these techniques.

Fear-Based Aggression

A fearful dog that feels trapped or is pushed too far may easily become aggressive. If your dog displays any aggressive behavior, such as growling, snarling, or snapping, seek professional help from an animal behavior specialist as soon as possible.

What NOT To Do

- Don't punish your dog for fearful behavior; it will make them more afraid and worsen their behavior.
- Don't force your dog into situations they can't handle thinking they'll just get used to it or get over it--they won't. In fact, they can be permanently traumatized.
- If your dog's fear is severe or widespread, medication may help in conjunction with behavior modification, but don't ever medicate your dog without the advice of a veterinarian. Animals' reactions to medications are not the same as humans'.